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ABSTRACT

The study surveyed 124 special education administrators to ascertain frequency and intensity of feelings leading to burnout during a period of time when workloads were relatively constant. A review of literature revealed a number of sources of burnout, including pressures from the implementation of P.L. 94-142 (the Education for All Handicapped Children Act), fiscal reductions, role ambiguity and conflict, and high incidence of staff absenteeism and turnover. The survey instrument used was the Maslach Burnout Inventory, which measured the existence and scope of burnout. Demographic data were collected which included current administrative position, length of time in administrative work, and areas of certification. Among findings were that assistant directors as a group scored lower than others on emotional exhaustion, substantially lower on depersonalization, and lower on personal accomplishment; that individuals employed in administration for 7 to 10 years experienced the greatest feelings of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization while those in administration for 4 to 6 years experienced the least; and that single or divorced administrators scored highest on emotional accomplishment. Symptoms of burnout were found to include fatigue and feelings of being physically run down, sleeplessness, increased irritability, and greater professional risk taking. Suggestions for stress/burnout reduction and/or prevention were listed, such as monitoring signals of uncommon pressures and practicing stress reduction techniques. (SW)

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# BURNOUT AMONG SPECIAL EDUCATION ADMINISTRATORS

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Burnout Among Special Education Administrators

Introduction

Supplying appropriate educational services to all handicapped students is the primary responsibility of professionals in the field of special education. Currently, this responsibility is being complicated by increasingly inadequate budgets, demanding legal obligations, and the stringent mandates of Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. These demands and pressures in conjunction with other work related duties place special education administrators in a vulnerable position for emotional and intellectual depletion, a phenomenon currently referred to as "burnout".

Professionals enduring continued stress and strain as a result of unrelenting work demands are particularly subject to burnout. Cherniss & Egnatios (1978) have identified four sets of factors which appear to relate to the frustration and work alienation experienced among community mental health workers: (a) feelings of inadequacy due to poor training and supervision; (b) lack of feedback concerning one's responsibilities; (c) paper work; and (d) role conflicts, poorly defined job objectives, sudden changes in rules and regulations, and the need to consider and respond to political and organizational issues. These sources of frustration appear to be consistent with those of administrators in the area of special education.

The social climate of the nation that facilitated the anti-discrimination legislation for handicapped individuals, culminating in Public Law 94-142, has prompted changes in the bureaucratic

structure of the government. The result has been a dramatic shift in role definition for special education administrators. Instead of focusing on management and program development, they now are forced to justify the suitability of their services and program delivery systems (Lamb & Burello, 1979). The administrator, lost amidst due process hearings, review audits, reluctant superintendents, and concerned but dissatisfied parents and advocates, becomes a victim of excessive workloads and unrealistic deadlines.

Despite the growing concern of the antecedents and consequences of burnout, few studies have identified the scope of the problem. The intent of this study was to discern the extent of burnout among special education administrators in the state of Illinois and examine the conditions which appear to contribute to its existence.

Administrators were surveyed to ascertain frequency and intensity of feelings leading to burnout during a period of time when work loads were relatively constant. It was hoped by this researcher that if a pervasive problem was discovered to exist, then efforts could be made to alleviate and/or preclude sources of stress which lead to burnout.

## Background Information

The causes of burnout are as varied as the definitions and characteristics. Frequently cited as a major cause of this pervasive problem is stress. Individuals in situations where there is a high

level of stress, with no professional nor personal outlets often fall victim. The individual, in this case, becomes increasingly discouraged and finally withdraws (Cherniss, 1980).

Burnout often materializes when a person is understimulated; they are incapable of proving their worth to either self or employer. Often thought to be a malady of institutional settings with assembly line employees, there is now evidence that suggests that boredom exists in every strata of skilled and unskilled employment. Individuals in situations whereby minimal levels of functioning are acceptable eventually become bored and subsequently burn out (Ricken, 1980).

Burnout can also occur as a result of working closely and continuously with troubled individuals with little opportunity to retreat (Collins, 1977). Working conditions such as low pay, lack of benefits, and unpaid overtime may contribute significantly to these individual's job dissatisfaction (Whitebook, et. al, 1981). Maslach and Pines (1977) maintain that burnout is primarily a result of working conditions and situational pressures. They assert that it does not result due to a unique set of personality traits.

Bishop (1980) and Whitebook, et. al (1981) contradict this assertion. They feel that although burnout is related directly to the job rather than to personal difficulties, there are particular types of individuals which frequently are affected. A common feature of the personalities in the occupations with the highest incidence of burnout are those measuring success and failure in terms

of standards as opposed to pay scales, profits, or status symbols. Individuals who tend to engage in work dealing with helping people tend to be idealistic and highly motivated to improve conditions around them; however, they do not have a realistic sense of their own ability to create positive change. These individuals enter their occupations with high expectations of making the world better and soon become disillusioned.

Emotional and physical exhaustion and the loss of enthusiasm and idealism towards one's profession signal the onset of burnout (Cherniss, 1980). If the problem is allowed to progress, serious psychological and physical disorders can result. The victim of burnout often withdraws by detatchment and aloofness and becomes cynical and negative towards associates (Collins, 1977). The term "combat neuroses" is used by Bloch (1978) to describe this behavior which is similar to that experienced by World War II shell shock victims.

Cherniss, et. al. (in press) describe three types of changes in professional attitudes and behavior which result from burnout: (a) decline in trust, sympathy, and tolerance for clients, viewing them as objects as opposed to individuals with real problems; (b) a decline in idealism, hope and optimism; (c) increased compartmentalization of and withdrawal from work--with fulfillment of higher order needs being met by turning to nonwork related activities. These attitudes become a part of the individuals experiencing burnout and greatly interfere in their professional and personal lives.

Physical consequences of burnout range from the mild to the severe. Back pain, frequent colds, dizziness, anxiety, insomnia, and headaches are some of the physical consequences. Such minor physical maladies may evolve into asthma, ulcers,colitis, and other gastrointestinal disorders, mental ill health, high blood pressure, and other serious illnesses if left unattended (Bloch, 1978; Maslach, 1979; Moses, 1980; Freudenberger, 1977). Cherniss (1980) reports that individuals who are bored or frustrated with their work show differences in blood chemistry which may lead to serious ailments, as well. These physical problems frequently are compounded by increased drug and/or alcohol use as well as marital and family difficulties (Maslach and Jackson, 1981).

Stress and Burnout Specific to Administrators

Research related to burnout has been concentrated in the "helping professions"; however it is suspected that burnout is more than an isolated occurance in business and administration. Although it may occur at a slower pace, the end results of lower productivity and high turnover rate are the same (Bishop, 1980). Neville (1981) reports that administrative professionals responsible for service functions frequently face the occupational hazards of stress and burnout. Special education administrators have a unique set of responsibilities, all of which contribute to high levels of stress and frustration. These personnel are faced with constant managerial pressures as well as those resulting from the implementation of Public Law 94-142, fiscal reductions, serious role ambiguity and

conflict, and an increasingly high incidence of staff absenteeism and turnover.

Stress-evoking pressures confronting business and administrative personnel include cumulative and constant job demands, insufficient time allottments to appropriately perform expected roles, unexpected occurances requiring immediate attention, and staff reductions, evaluations and conflicts (Koff, et. al., 1979-1980). Research conducted among administrators in the field of education reveal the following as situations highly conducive to excessive stress: (a)compliance with complex federal, state, and local regulations and policies; (b) promulgation of directives and central administration demands: (c) paperwork requirements; (d) maintenance of public approval and financial support for educational programs; (e) supervision of employees; and (f) frequency of meetings and telephone calls (Washington, 1980; Swent & Gmelch, 1977).

Public Law 94-142 has had a dramatic impact on those involved with the operation and administration of public schools (Griffin, et. al., 1981). The uncompromising mandates of this law call for administrators and teachers to assume responsibilities which are totally different from those with which they are accustomed. These personnel must be involved in the identification and placement of handicapped students, development, administration and monitoring of Individual Educational Programs , due process procedures and safeguards, personnel training and inservices (Bensky, et. al., 1980;

orelove, 1978).

Identification of handicapped individuals between the ages of three and twenty-one (3-21) involves working closely with the mass media and local agencies to ensure that all those in need of special services are located. Placing those identified into the least restrictive environment requires the special education administrator to consider all educational, legal, economic, and logistic concerns. In addition, angry, frustrated, and confused parents of handicapped children must be faced to explain the role of special education (Orelove, 1978).

Once placed in an educational setting deemed appropriate by all concerned, I. E. P.s must be written for each student. The length and content must meet all state requirements, again calling for administrative attention. I. E. P. conferences are mandated, also, necessitating locating the involved individuals and arranging times which meet both staff and parent needs. In addition, each I. E. P. must be monitored to ensure that evaluation and remediation strategies take place as stipulated.

Procedural safeguards and professional rights and responsibilities are also an important consideration of the special education administrator. According to P. L. 94-142, specific steps must be taken to ensure that parents have received information regarding their right to appeal any decision made with respect to their child's education (Orelove, 1978). Due process ensures each citizen the right to protest

any actions which may adversely affect him. Although special educators familiar with P. L. 94-142 assume due process is relatively simple, the regulations are not totally comprehensive nor clear. Numerous arguable issues among local education agencies, state education agencies, public agencies, and parents can be triggered by due process hearings (Turnbull, III, et. al, 1979).

One of the most challenging aspects of P. L. 94-142 is the legislation addressing personnel development. Special and regular education personnel must be informed of the law and its legal and educational implications as well as recommendations for service delivery through inservice meetings and workshops. For this to be effective, an interchange of ideas, proper spirit of cooperation among all school personnel, and the securing of information and expertise from all available sources is needed. This presents a formidable tasks for all involved (Humes, 1978).

The financial strain of supplying appropriate educational services to all students is also a major source of concern for the special education administrator. The average cost of educating a handicapped child is at least twice that of educating a nonhandicapped child. State departments of education and local education agencies provide a range of services previously not considered viable. Family counseling, physical and occupational therapy, mobility training, and psychological services are available from mental health centers, hospitals, and rehabilitation centers at considerable costs to the

education agency (Schipper, 1980).

Levels of funding, federal commitment, federal and state partnerships, scope of the state education agencies, responsibilities for providing services, and tax revolts posing serious risks to institutional survival are critical issues impacting on the education of the handicapped (Schipper, 1980: Tung, 1980). Because of these factors, educational administrators concerned with supplying appropriate educational services are called upon to plan, project, and communicate in order to obtain the legislative commitments needed for this population (Burello, et. al, 1978).

Another area of concern for the administrator in special education is role ambiguity, resentment, and interpersonal problems between special and regular staff members and administration (Dixon, et. al, 1980). The organizational structure of education is comprised of various specialized sub-units designed to meet the needs of the population to be served. Administrative expectations can be clearly delineated as long as the boundaries for the responsibilities of each sub-unit remain intact. However, this is no longer the case for administrative positions in the field of education (Robson, 1981).

When individuals are expected to perform at high levels but the expectations are unclear or unrealistic, they are conducive to stress and burnout (Cherniss, 1980). Identified as ambiguous areas of role definition among administrators in education are: consultative aspects in the area of personnel; roles dealing with

parents and advocacy groups; maintenance of special education organizations; referrals, transportation, diagnosis and placement of students; supervision and evaluation of personnel; and direction of pupil services within the buildings (Robson, 1981). These poorly defined areas of administration pose confusion and frustration among those directly and indirectly involved.

The prevention of burnout among special services personnel is the final concern of administrators. Maslach and Jackson (1981) cite job turnover, absenteeism, and low morale as results of burnout among these types of professionals. Absenteeism among teaching staff nas been increasing annually (Harlin, 1978). High turnover rate also has been reported. The increased amount of time that administrators spend recruiting, hiring, and providing orientation for new staff indicates an acute problem (Dixon, et.al., 1980).

Professional disillusionment, open resistence to federal, state, and local bureaucratic regulations and procedures relating to service delivery, and lack of input into the educational process are cited as reasons for high absenteeism and turnover rate among service personnel (Scrivens, 1979; Ryor, 1978; Ricken, 1980). To prevent staff members from becoming ineffective, administrators are called upon to understand the stress which is affecting them and provide assistance through personnel training and inservice (Dixon, et. al, 1980; Orelove, 1978).

Research Study

The major efforts of this study were to gather data which addressed the following research concerns: (a) Does intellectual and emotional depeition occur, to a significant degree, among special education administrators in the state of Illinois? (b) Does intellectual and emotional depletion in the specific areas of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment exist to a significant degree among this population? (c) If "burnout" does exist, what is the scope? (d) What demographic variables (position, length of time as an administrator, age, sex, marital status, geographic locale, etc.) appear to attribute to a High incidence among the administrators?

Funds for special education services in the state of Illinois flow through Joint Agreements before being funneled to Local Education Agencies. Therefore, the population targeted to serve in this study included directors, assistant directors, and coordinators in the eighty-seven (87) Joint Agreements in the state.

Also participating in the study was a small group of regional directors and their second-level administrators. Responses from principals, curriculum supervisors, and state board administrative personnel were deleted from the data analyzed.

The Maslach Burnout Inventory was used to evaluate the prevalence and severity of burnout among this group of special education administrators. For purposes of this study, the word "recipient" as

employed by Maslach, was changed to "co-worker". In addition, a questionnaire requesting fifteen (15) items of demographic data was used.

The Maslach Burnout Inventory consists of twenty-five (25) items with each statement rated on frequency and intensity. The frequency scale ranges from one ("a few times a year or less") to six ("every day"). A value of zero is given if the respondent never experiences the described attitude or feeling; a separate box labeled "never" is used in this event. The intensity scale ranges from one ("very mild, barely noticeable") to seven ("major, very strong").

The demographic questionnaire included in this study consisted of fifteen items. The following information was gathered via this questionnaire: current administrative position; years in current position; length of time in administrative work; length of time in the field of education; whether or not an administrative position had been held outside of special education; population of Joint Agreement serviced; hours per week worked; educational degrees held; areas of certification; amount of workshops attended; university/ college hours completed in the past three years; sex; marital status; age; and location of personal residence.

A total of one hundred eighty-one (181) questionnaires were dispersed for this research. Of that number, one hundred thirty-seven (137) were returned, with an established response rate of seventy-six (76) percent. Thirteen (13) questionnaires were incomplete or

completed by principals, ISBE personnel, social workers, or curriculum supervisors, leaving a total of one hundred twenty-four (124) for analysis.

The existence and scope of burnout were ascertained according to the established criteria on the Maslach Burnout Inventory. This inventory contains three normative scales: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. Persons scoring above the mean on the emotional exhaustion and depersonalization subscales and below the mean on the personal accomplishment subscale were considered to be "burned out".

Means were calculated for each respondent on each of the three subscales for severity and frequency. These means were compared to the standardized means in each of the six areas in order to determine burnout. In addition, combined means of intensity and frequency for each of the subscales were calculated and subsequently compared to Maslach's standardized mean of means. A percentage of those considered "burned out" as compared to the total number of respondents was calculated using both approaches.

A determination of those "burned out" on any of the three subscales was made using the combined frequency and intensity standardized means. This analysis provided information regarding those administrators in potential danger of burnout.

Subscale mean intensity scores and mean frequency scores were calculated for each item of demograhpic data. This allowed for a clear presentation of the relationships which existed between the

demographic variables and experienced burnout on each of the three subscales.

To further assess the impact of the various demographic variables, chi square for contingency was used. Bivariate frequency tables were constructed for each item of demographic data and marginal frequencies determined. This analysis yielded information regarding the significance of the relationships between items of demographic data and the incidence of burnout.

Finally, a stepwise multiple regression procedure was instituted using each item of demographic data, for those subjects identified as "burned out" on any of the subscales as well as those burned out on all subscales. This provided information regarding factors which were most highly correlated with burnout.

Analysis of the MBI data revealed that burnout using the means for intensity and frequency on each of the three subscales was experienced by 5.65% of the respondents, or 7 out of 124. Using the mean of means for frequency and intensity on the three subscales, the percentage of burnout was raised to 13.7% or 17 out of 124. However, burnout on one of the three subscales using mean of means for intensity and frequency ranged from 37.1% to 45.26% of the total surveyed population. A clear presentation of burnout for frequency and intensity for total burnout as well as burnout on the subscales is presented in Table 1.

Analysis of subscale grand means for each item of demographic data yielded some interesting findings. Assistant directors as

a group appear to score less on emotional exhaustion, substantially less on depersonalization, but also less on personal accomplishment. Those administrators in the "other" category scored highest on emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, but also had the greatest feelings of personal accomplishment. Administrators working in their current position from 4-6 years scored lowest on the emotional exhaustion and depersonalization subscales while those working 7-10 scored the highest. Administrators working 50-59 hours per week had the highest average scores on emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, with those working 30-39 hours having the lowest scores of emotional exhaustion.

Review of the professional and educational demographic variables reveals that individuals employed in administration for 7-10 years experience the greatest feelings of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization while those with 4-6 years of experience scored the least. Individuals professionally involved in education for 1-5 years had significantly less emotional exhaustion and depersonalization and greater feelings of personal accomplishment. Experiencing the lowest feelings of emotional exhaustion and the greatest feelings of personal accomplishment were those holding educational specialist degrees. Interestingly, as a group, those administrators with the least severe feelings of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization were those attending from 0-3 workshops in the past three years. The group of individuals experiencing the lowest feelings of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization on the frequency dimension were those

having completed greater than 20 university/college coursework hours.

Analysis of the grand means on the frequency and intensity dimensions for personal variables indicates that females scored higher on emotional exhaustion and personal accomplishment with men scoring the highest on depersonalization. Single or divorced administrators scored highest on emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishment. Scoring the highest on emotional exhaustion and depersonalization and lowest on the personal accomplishment were administrators in the age range of 30-39. Individuals living in large cities had significantly lower scores on emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, with those residing in metropolitan areas scoring highest on personal accomplishment.

Chi square analyses of the various demographic factors failed to yield any significant results of variables corresponding to total burnout. However, when the same analyses was applied to each of the subscales of the MBI, several factors appeared to be significant. The analysis showed that directors were more likely to score below the mean on the personal accomplishment subscale than assistant directors and other special administrators. In addition, it appears that those: (a) working 40-49 hours per week, (b) with masters degrees, and (c) those who are married also have a greater propensity to burnout on the personal accomplishment subscale.

Symptoms of Burnout

Certain symptoms appear to presage the onset of burnout. Sleeplessness, loss of weight, depression, shortness of breath,

disenchantment, the inability to relax, and resentment may be indicative of burnout. Behavioral changes may also be exhibited. One may become noticably less verbal at meetings, withdrawn, show symptoms of rigidity and be exceptionally short tempered. Individuals suffering from burnout often feel that their work loads are extensive and may emotionally erupt at the slightest provocation; they display signs of having no defenses nor control of feelings. These particular symptoms also can manifest themselves in those who are suffering from the routine pressures of life, and not from burnout. However, when the symptoms become pervasive and affect all aspects of one's life, burnout may be occuring (Sammons, 1980).

According to Freudenberger (1977), a primary warning signal is the expenditure of increased effort with lessened results. As the burnout syndrome evolves, fatigue and irritability coupled with mild depression, boredom, and feelings of overwork surface. This emotional exhaustion causes the professional to lose positive feelings, sympathy, and respect for their coworkers and associates (Maslach, 1978). If the professionals stay in the same position, the severity of burnout advances, resulting in increased inflexibility (Freudenberger, 1977).

Figler (1978), Hall, et. al. (1979), Hendrickson (1979), and Gaff (1978) offer the following as physical symptoms of burnout: (a) fatigue and feelings of being physically run down; (b) headaches and gastrointenstinal disturbances; (c) weight loss; (d) sleeplessness; (e) shortness of breath. In conjunction, such behaviors as these may be demonstrated: (a) changeable mood;

(b) increased irritability; (c) depression; (d) loss of caring for people; (e) lowered tolerance for frustration; (f) suspiciousness of others; (g) feelings of helplessness; and (h) greater professional risk taking.

Remediation Strategies and Recommendations

As the demands in the area of special education increase, the likelihood of stress as a negative reaction is probable. An individual's resilience or adaptability decreases when faced with different forms of stress (Colarelli, 1978). Uncertainty, role overload or underload, abrupt and unplanned organizational and role changes, and poor job design are all different forms of stress leading to burnout.

The following are suggestions offered by authorities in the field of stress/burnout reduction and/or prevention:

Messer, Amis, Atkin (1981):

(a) monitor signals of uncommon pressures

(b) obtain good nutrition and exercise

(c) withdraw a bit occasionally

(d) identify unreasonable demands on oneself

(e) end unpleasant relationships

(f) Convert worry into action

(g) take vacations

(h) set goals rather than passively acce pting those imposed by others

(i) act on what must be done, rather than avoid it

(j) accept the possibility of failure without losing a sense of self worth

(k) practice stress-reduction techniques

Platt (1981) offers these organizational solutions:

(a) stress-down time paid by the district

(b) all position should be analyzed in detail to see what the requirements of the position are and what tasks are critical to the job

(c) match positions with persons

(d) lines of authority and responsibility should be ascertained

(e) work overload can be avoided with analysis of positions as can work underload

(f) interpersonal tensions should be dealt with by superiors; just knowing the boss is aware of the problem can be supportive

(g) administrators and other individuals affected by job changes should be involved in group discussion before the actual change takes place

Political and social unrest is claiming the expertise and power of administrative personnel at all levels. Laws and their implications have now moved to the forefront of governance concerns, demanding additional participatory and coordinative skills on the part of administrators (Herda, 1980). If administrators in special education are to continue to provide services to the handicapped, their resources must be preserved. They must be cognizant of the potential stressors in the area, the sources and symptoms, and be able to address them appropriately.

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